DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 874 CS 007 988

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TITLE Refinements in Teaching Comprehension: Who Should Ask the Questions?
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Illinois Reading Council (17th, Peoria, IL, March 7-9, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Questioning Techniques; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Research; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A field study tested a teaching method to increase comprehension by instructing students about the nature of questions and the "art" of composing good comprehension questions. The eight guidelines on which the method was developed included (1) making students aware of the purpose of such questions; (2) explaining to students that there are three kinds of questions: literal, inferential, and judgmental; and (3) working with students on developing questions before letting them work on their own. When tested in primary, middle, and junior high grade levels, the technique appeared to have many benefits. Both students and teachers responded enthusiastically to the procedure. The questioning method increased interest, participation, and comprehension ability. Teachers who had taught the same basal reading program for five years reported that their experimental groups attained the best scores ever on unit tests. (HTH)

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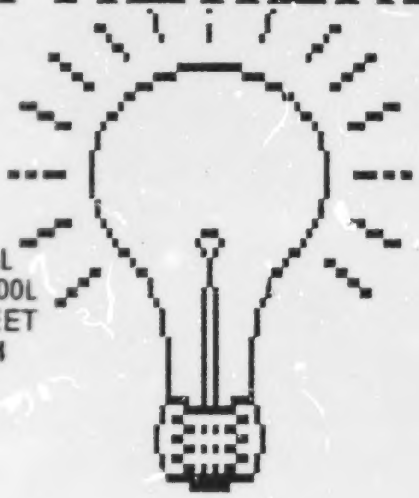
REFINEMENTS IN TEACHING COMPREHENSION



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Field Study by the
Comprehension Study Group

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WHO SHOULD ASK THE QUESTIONS?

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REFINEMENTS IN TEACHING COMPREHENSION
Who Should Ask The Questions?

Judge a man by his questions
rather than by his answers.
-Voltaire

I. Introduction

A group of six educators assembled in March of 1983 to investigate the possibility of finding ways of refining the teaching of comprehension. It was decided to invest some time in reading the research literature about experimental procedures being talked about by educators on the growing edge of reading instruction. The group read and discussed a series of procedures from March until September. In September, the group identified a comprehension teaching technique to study and field test.

The idea of the field study was explained to all the elementary classroom teachers and they were invited to join the field study project. By October, there were 14 teachers from grades 1 - 8 applying the field study procedure. This group used the procedure and met periodically to discuss progress. The study offically closed out in mid-February, 1985.

II. The Field Study

First, it should be said that we recognize the limitations of our study. The period of time that the procedure was applied was little more than one semester. Also, we make no claims for having conducted a piece of scientific research. Rather, the group (1) devised a teaching procedure, (2) applied it in their classrooms and (3) subjectively compiled their observations and findings. Although the results reported here are admittedly subjective, the reader should understand that the field study teachers are a group of well trained, experienced teachers who are sharing their experience without any desire to impress anyone.

The proposition that we tested is that students may be able to enhance their ability to comprehend by being taught to compose comprehension questions rather than always answering questions. It is possible that the thinking that goes into composing questions ennances comprehension as much or more than the thinking that goes into answering questions.

III. The Field Study Technique

Traditionally, after students read from the reading textbook, the teacher asks a series of "comprehension questions". It is commonly believed that by thinking about and answering these questions, students increase their ability to read with understanding. This procedure seems to work reasonably well.

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However, recent research indicates that there is another technique that may be effective in advancing comprehension. This procedure has the teacher instructing students about the nature of questions and the "art" of composing good questions. This research indicated that the thought that goes into composing questions is as good as or even better (in developing comprehension) than the thought process required to answer questions.

The concept of teaching students about the nature of questions and providing practice in composing questions is so new that little is known about the best procedures to use when working on these factors. However, research and common sense gave us a starting point. We began our field study by using the 8 guidelines listed here.

1. At the primary level, spend a few class sessions analyzing pre-selected questions so that your students have a clear understanding of what a question is.

2. Remind your students that after they have read a selection from the reading textbook, the teacher usually asks questions about story. Explain that questions are asked to teach the students to think with the information they get from the story and to better understand it. Explain to the students that the questions the teacher asks come from the book, the manual, or the teacher may make up some of the questions. Tell the students that they can make up questions, too.

3. Explain to the students that there are three kinds of questions that may be asked. They are:

> Literal - The answer is "in the lines". This means the answer can be found in print. The reader can find the exact words to prove their answer.
>
> Inferential - The answer is "between the lines". This means the answer can not be found in the words. The reader must look for clues. The reader needs to put "two and two together to get four". A correct answer can be supported by deduction.
>
> Judgmental - The answer is "beyond the lines". This means that the reader will need to use his past experience along with the information he has read. The answer is an opinion, based on the story. There may be several answers that can be supported.

As you describe the kinds of questions, give examples from a current story.

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(Note: Items 1 - 3 are orientation steps to get the students thinking about the questioning process).

4. After the students have read a selection, the teacher asks several questions of each kind. After a question is answered, the teacher tells the class which kind of question it was and why.

5. For a period (a week or two), the teacher, as usual, asks comprehension questions after selections are read. In addition, however, the teacher classifies each question for the students and explains why the question is important to the story.

(Note: Items 4 - 5 are modeling activities. The teacher is helping the student to understand the questioning process. This modeling role is thought to be very important.

6. When the above practice has achieved its purpose, the teacher begins to have the students compose questions. The students are expected to make up questions and have answers that they can support. Also, the students should be able to classify their questions and at the junior high school level, be able to say why their questions are important/relevant to the story. Some of the questions that are prepared should be answered by other students and the teacher. This step may need to be done regularly for a period of several weeks before the students will be comfortable with the procedure.

7. Now, the procedure is established and the students are reasonable sure of what they are doing. For the remainder of the field study time, the procedure should be used only periodically - perhaps with every third or fourth selection. Notice we do not suggest discontinuing using the traditional method of questioning.

8. As the students become increasingly skillful with composing questions, you should deemphasize the classification aspect of questioning and now put more emphasis on judging the quality and clarity of questions the students compose. We are using quality in the sense of the question being central, germane, relevant, as opposed to being unimportant to the central idea of the story.

IV. Findings

In grades 1 and 2:

1. In the early stages, the teachers read aloud to the

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students so that the students did not have to expend energy on decoding.

2. During the first few months, the teachers concentrated on literal and inferential questions. Later, the students themselves noticed that there was a third category (judgmental questions).

3. We were surprised that the students at this level could handle the terminology and concepts so easily. One first grade group was composed of high risk students. They handled the procedure well and scored high on their unit tests. They especially liked to work with inferential questions.

4. The students liked being able to ask questions. Often, they would ask their teachers if the next story would be one where they could ask the questions.

5. The procedure is time consuming as questions take longer and each child wants a turn. For this reason, sometimes only part of the story was discussed.

6. This procedure gives added motivation to read and study the story. The students want to have good questions to ask and they want to be able to answer the questions their peers ask.

7. The procedure leads to oral reading for a purpose - to support an answer. Students become aware of the need to find proof for an answer and they end up doing it <u>automatically</u>.

8. At the beginning of the study, it was assumed that the procedure would not work with some stories. It was determined that some stories were better than others, but the procedure worked satisfactorily with all selections.

9. At the beginning of the study, it was assumed that the children would eventually tire of the procedure, so the procedure should be used sparingly. We found that the children did not become tired or bored with this technique.

10. The teachers became much more aware of the types of questions they were asking.

11. This procedure generated and maintained a much higher level of attention, interest and even excitment during the discussion of the story. One teacher spoke of her class being "electrified".

12. While writing out questions seemed desirable, it was too difficult for this grade level.

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In grades 3 - 4 - 5:

13. Same as #4,5,6,7,8,9,10 and 11.

14. Increased student involvement (rather than passive interest) was noted. Students really got into the stories and wanted their "two cents worth" heard. One fifth grader who had been a non-participator now likes to go back to the story to prove his point.

15. The discussions between student and teacher became more natural and in greater depth.

16. It is important to have the students write out their questions before the discussion begins. It builds in an accountability factor.

17. Students and teachers became so involved with asking questions, answering questions and supporting answers that the selection, as a piece of literature, is diminished.

18. This process can be used in the content fields such as science and social studies.

19. The matter of assessing whether a question is relevant and of good quality was difficult at this level.

20. It was helpful to structure and focus the question writing assignment.
Example: Today, I want your questions to be about the setting of the story.

In grades 6 - 7 - 8:

21. Same as #4,6,7,8,9,10,11,14,15,16,18,19,20.

22. At this level the students very quickly learned the types of questions and automatically applied the terms to the questions the authors of their basal reader had prepared.

23. At this level, it is even more important to have the questions written out before the discussion and the answer written also.

24. We have found that it worked well to have the students work in pairs and answer each other's questions in writing.

25. Teachers have been known to overhear students using the terminology outside of class time.

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26. At first, the questions the students wrote were often too general or vague. The students learned to be more clear and they developed an appreciation for good questions that others wrote.

27. The process works better with fiction than non-fiction.

28. Students learn to be more discriminating in their thought processes - both in writing questions and in defending their answers.

29. Students report that preparing questions gave them a better understanding of the author's thoughts.

V. Student Comments

The following comments were made by students who had learned to compose questions.

> "When I make up questions, I am better able to answer the questions of others."
>
> "It makes me remember the important facts of the story."
>
> "Finding the questions is more difficult than finding the answers."
>
> "Inference questions are hard for me to make up."
>
> "You get more deeply involved in the story."
>
> "I like judgemental questions because they get me into the story and I get to make some decisions."
>
> "I guess the reason I can't find the answer on the page is because it's an inferential question."

VI. Conclusions

On the basis of our limited study, we believe that teaching children to compose questions has many benefits. The procedure, with proper adaptations, works well as low as first grades. Both students and teachers respond enthusiastically to the procedure. The questioning method increases interest, participation and comprehension ability. Teachers who have taught the same basal reading program for five years reported that their experimental groups attained the best scores ever on unit tests.

The probelms and shortcomings that resulted from using this procedure were few and minimal. There seems to be no risk in using the method.

We believe that the procedure we developed can be used successfully by all reading teachers. The method seems so beneficial that consideration should be given to building it into basal reading programs.

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